

SHOWING YOUR STUDENTS YOU CARE: SEEING THE INDIVIDUAL TREES IN THE CLASSROOM FOREST

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"There isn't any solution to this problem of education other than to realize that the best teaching can be done only when there is a direct individual relationship between a student and a good teacher—a situation in which the student discusses the ideas, thinks about the things, and talks about the things... But in our modern times we have so many students to teach that we have to try to find some substitute for the ideal" (Feynman, 1995, p. xxix).

"If we never ask, then how are we to ever know?" (Preservice elementary school mathematics teacher).

The first comment, made by the Noble-laureate physicist Richard Feynman, who also won the prestigious Oersted Medal for physics teaching, conveys the challenges teachers face when asked to teach students in regular class sizes (as opposed to individual tutoring). Teaching is a complex profession, and although every context is unique, teachers face common challenges. We have identified two challenges that nearly every teacher encounters: (a) managing a classroom of students; and (b) addressing the needs of individual students. Although these are not teachers' only challenges, we highlight them because we think that they are ubiquitous. The first, learning to manage a classroom, includes disciplining students, assigning and collecting homework, as well as assessing and evaluating students. Classroom management is the first, and usually the greatest, challenge for new teachers, but it is one that teachers generally master within a few years. The second is different

from the first in that, we believe, meeting the needs of individual students is a challenge that all teachers continue to grapple with throughout their careers.

In this article, we offer a general recommendation to new (and experienced) teachers at all levels for both managing a classroom of students and addressing the needs of individual students. We call this recommendation *showing your students that you care*. We first explain what we mean by *caring* and then offer specific ways teachers might apply caring and its usefulness in their teaching.

Caring

Teachers enter classrooms with a variety of ideas for experiences they want to provide for their students—experiences designed to expand students' knowledge bases and help them learn to critically analyze new ideas. Too few students value what their teachers have to offer. How can teachers increase the likelihood that the experiences provided for their students are being received? To answer this question, we find Noddings's (1984) views of *caring* helpful.

Noddings (1984) described three elements in a caring relationship—the one caring, the one cared for, and the relationship between the two. Furthermore, both the one caring and the cared-for have responsibilities in a caring relationship, and a full caring relationship cannot be attained unless the one caring cares in a way that the cared-for can receive. Noddings wrote, "Does this mean that I cannot be said to care for X if X does not recognize my caring? In the fullest sense, I think we have to accept this result" (p. 68). One should note an important distinction: Someone may care deeply about another person, whether the second person knows it or not. But for Noddings, the caring relationship is not completed unless the cared-for feels the caring. In other words, as important as it is for teachers to care about their students, caring alone is not enough. To fulfill the caring relationship, the students must sense that the teacher cares. To extend the caring relationship to teaching, we consider three elements of the teaching-learning relationship: the teacher, the student, and the relationship between the two. A full teaching-learning relationship cannot be attained unless the

one teaching instructs in a way that the one learning can receive. Thus to *show your students that you care* becomes an essential element of the teacher-learner relationship.

Developing a Caring Stance Toward Students

How can teachers develop a stance of caring? The first author describes an assignment from his secondary mathematics methods course, which students take while student teaching. (Hereafter we refer to the student teachers as *teachers* and their students as *students*.) The majority of the curriculum in the methods course is mathematical, but one assignment the teachers appreciate requires them to select one student from one class they teach and arrange to spend 15 minutes talking with the student about issues other than mathematics. Teachers are encouraged to talk to the student about personal (but appropriate) issues, such as the student's goals, background and family, languages spoken, hobbies, or favorite music, and to consider talking to a student who has been particularly trying to them during their student teaching.

One favorite story from this assignment came from a female student teacher who selected a male student who had become the biggest troublemaker in her class. She stated that the student was taken aback by her invitation to meet at lunch, but the conversation went well. As a result of the experience, the student's classroom behavior changed completely, and he became one of the teacher's strongest advocates, even ordering other students to "be quiet" when the teacher was talking. Imagine the change in a class if the student who had been most disruptive, suddenly, and seemingly over night, became the one to help maintain order in the class!

To provide a sense of the experience, we feature a teacher's story that captures several themes that can emerge when teachers spend time talking with students for the purpose of getting to know them. Following this vignette, we highlight themes by drawing from the reflections of other student teachers.

My showing my students I care actually was initiated because I had a student who was distracted and rarely turned in his homework, so on a day that he had not done anything,

and had not done his homework I called him after class to figure out what was going on. In just my noticing that something was wrong, he began to cry. I gave him a tissue and after giving him a few minutes, I asked him what was going on that was distracting him from class and causing his non-turned in homework. From just asking, I learned more about this student than I think most teachers know. He explained how his mom and dad had gotten a divorce in the last month and that as a result of this split, they had split him away from his brother. So he was living with his dad and his brother with his mom. He told me that he missed his brother and this was why he was not focusing. Not only did this help me understand his situation but it taught me that there is always something else going on. We all know this, but I think that sometimes as a teacher we forget that life happens and school is not the only thing that affects these kids' lives . . . From this talk, I took the opportunity to lighten the mood as I walked him to (his next) class (since he was late) and ask him about other things that he likes to do. (He likes fishing with his dad.) I know that I am not all knowing but I shared the outlook I had on his situation. I explained that we don't have much control of the things that go on in our lives but that school, especially at his age, is something that he does have control of and maybe this could be the place where he did not have to think about the sadness but focus on himself. The following three weeks, this student raised his grade from a D- to a B. He began turning in his work and from that he saw results on his next test . . . When I first went to talk with the student, I was not expecting tears and they came as a surprise to me. He was a little apprehensive to talk to me during class up to this point, but when we talked one to one, he really seemed comfortable. This helped me feel comfortable. The talk went great and the results I saw from this were also great. I have since then tried talking to most of my other students and have been pretty successful. I have one that really just doesn't like me, or so it seems, and talking to him has not been too helpful. I think my students can see that I genuinely care about them.

Theme 1: Seeing One Group of People Versus Seeing Individuals Within the Group

Teachers learn to focus in the classroom first on what *they* are doing, then on what their *students* are doing, with the ultimate goal to focus on what their students are *learning*. With these shifts in foci comes a deeper understanding of each student. Learning to see the individual trees in the classroom forest takes time for new teachers. One teacher addressed this challenge, when she wrote, “I find myself lumping all the students together as a “class,” a rather impersonal body consisting of students . . . One-on-one meetings help me see students as individuals and see them in a different light.”

When teachers spend time talking with students individually, they often change their perceptions of the students. One teacher wrote, “I definitely look at him with a new lens since I got to witness a more positive side of him,” and another teacher wrote,

Mark is great; he’s become one of my favorite students in the class (I know we’re not supposed to say we have favorites but I just can’t help it) despite the problems he has posed. He is one of the students who so far has helped me grow the most as a student teacher.

Theme 2: Talking to Individual Students Is Threatening to Some Teachers

Some teachers are threatened by the idea of talking one-on-one with a student, a fact that might seem surprising given that in their profession teachers work with and serve as a leader for groups of young people. However, teachers’ hesitation to talk with individual students is understandable, because this experience can make teachers feel vulnerable. One teacher wrote,

When I sat down next to this student, she barely looked up at me and acknowledged that I was there. I immediately felt the wall that she was putting up, and immediately I felt my wall go up too. . . My thoughts raced a mile a second in that

instant, but I fought against them and opened up the conversation by asking how she was doing.

This comment highlights the courage teachers need to talk to individual students. In our experience, however, most teachers who spend time with students find that the students relax when they see that the teacher is genuinely interested in getting to know them.

Theme 3: One Conversation Can Initiate Significant Positive Change

Teachers expend a great deal of mental and physical energy thinking about and working with individual students. Student teachers often seek advice about how to work with a particular student who is disruptive or who does not exhibit a positive attitude. Interestingly, we have found that when teachers spend 15 minutes talking with a student, they can significantly improve the teacher-learner relationship, leading to positive changes in the student. The student described in the vignette began to apply himself and thus dramatically improved his grades. Another teacher wrote of the results of her speaking with a student:

He started doing his homework on a regular basis. Better yet, he has even been proud of the fact that he has been doing his homework. He came up to me the other day after class and showed me all of his homework stamps that he had received that week for completing his homework. He was so excited and so was I.

Moving From the General to the Content: Assessing Students' Mathematical Understanding

Showing our students that we care often has positive outcomes for both teacher and student, but most teachers believe that their first responsibility is to teach content. We share a powerful technique for helping teachers learn about their students' mathematical understanding—talking to students about their mathematical thinking. As simple as this suggestion

sounds, we have found that teachers are often not taught how to learn about students' mathematical thinking.

Assigning Mathematical-Content Interviews

The second author assigns the students in her elementary mathematics methods course to conduct individual interviews with children. (Again, we refer to the student teachers as *teachers* and to their interviewees as *students*.) The purposes of these interviews are for the teachers: to learn about their students' mathematical knowledge; to learn how to question individual students about their thinking; and to recognize that they can learn from their students.

These purposes align with Theme 1: Seeing One Group of People Versus Seeing Individuals Within the Group. One teacher commented, “[The interview] helped me to learn that students will all think differently,” and concluded, “I should...get to know my students so I can apply different ways to help them.” Another teacher commented on learning from individual students: “Interviews can also be beneficial because sometimes students will show you a method that you were not familiar with or another way to go about the problem.”

Interviewing students about their mathematical understanding may be threatening to teachers in various ways. Theme 2: Talking to Individual Students Is Threatening to Some Teachers, is reflected in the following teacher comments. One teacher stated, “These interviews, although extremely nerve-racking at first, were actually a great experience and I’m glad we had the opportunity to take part in them.” Another teacher worried that she would divulge the answers: “At first, I questioned myself about the way I was asking the questions because I did not want to give everything away.”

When asked whether they would conduct interviews in their classrooms, the teachers reacted positively. One teacher stated, “I would definitely perform interviews with my own class because both the student and teacher benefit from them. It was a fun and personable activity that also gives a better student-teacher relationship” This comment aligns with Theme 3: One Conversation Can Initiate Significant Positive Change.

Theme 4: Questioning Students Beyond Their Stated Answer

In addition to the three previously stated themes, a fourth theme emerged for the teachers conducting mathematics interviews with their students. The teachers began to see the importance of questioning students beyond a stated answer, and thus, not necessarily taking correct answers as indicating correct reasoning nor taking the lack of a correct answer as indicating a lack of understanding. One teacher explained, "We aren't just looking for right answers; we are looking for how the students are thinking and the strategies they are using to come up with the solution." Another teacher reflected on the relationship between correct answers and correct thinking:

Before this class I would have typically given a problem to a child and if that child got the technical "right" answer, I would have let it go. But we needed to find out their thinking process and that would then reveal where their strengths were, weaknesses were, and their misunderstandings of the problem. An interview like this really offers an opportunity to open a whole different world to your child and making you realize there is so much going on their heads, and we need to tap into that so we can maximize their understanding as best as possible.

A third teacher commented on distinguishing understanding from use of procedures:

You are not able to know if a person truly understands what is going on in a problem or if they are just doing the math robotically. I think that the interviews helped with my learn[ing] process because now I know how to question students better to truly find out what they do and do not understand in math problems.

The interviews enabled the teachers to appreciate the need to ask questions so that they understand students' thinking. As the teacher quoted in the opening stated further, "After interview[ing the child], I see that it is important to the learning process and knowing how much the child understood at that stage in their life. If we never ask, then how are we to ever know?"

Final Comments

Do you feel that you care about your students? Do your students feel that you care? In this article, we have highlighted a technique designed to help teachers show a caring posture toward their students. Although there is no substitute for spending 15 or more minutes talking with individual students, we recognize that teachers—especially early in their careers—may feel overwhelmed with the job and may not find time to interview all their students. We end with two suggestions. First, if you cannot spend 15 minutes talking to each of your students individually, then talk to a few students. The experience has the potential to be powerful for you and for your students. Second, interviewing students individually to learn about their mathematical reasoning may be eye-opening for teachers, but if you cannot conduct extended mathematical interviews with all students, try conducting brief, one- or two-minute interviews with some students. While students are working independently, teachers can question individuals to gather important information about a student's thinking on a current topic or one the teacher has yet to introduce.

Teachers can, in many ways, show students that they care. Perhaps you have found ways to do so. We end by sharing one method developed by a student teacher. Inspired by the *showing-your-students-you-care* assignment, she developed a written survey (see Appendix) that students completed as part of a homework assignment. The information gathered was helpful to the teacher, and her students appreciated her referring to something she had learned from the survey when talking to them. Other new teachers have successfully used the survey, and perhaps you too will find it useful.

References

Feynman, R. P. (1995). *Six easy pieces*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Appendix

Getting To Know You

Written Survey

One secondary school student teacher designed a written survey "to get to know" her students and administered it in her class. She even completed the survey first, sharing personal but appropriate information about herself. She was excited that the information she gathered enabled her to know more about each student, and when she shared the survey with other student teachers, a few used the idea and they were also delighted with the results. Below is the survey.

Getting to Know You!

Please answer these with as much detail as you can. I really and truly want to get to know each and every one of you!!

1. Name:
Nickname:
2. Birth Date:
3. Describe the things you are passionate about:
4. Any hobbies? After school stuff? Sports you play?
5. Name at least 3 interesting facts about yourself that most people don't know.
6. Name the subject you think you are the best at in school ... how about the worst?
7. What are a few things you would do if tomorrow was your last day on earth?
8. Do you have a favorite color? Favorite word? Favorite number?
9. List the types of music you like to listen to. Please include names of songs and artists. ☺
10. Name the thing you like the best about yourself.

On the back, put whatever else you want me to know about you. ☺